

What's a teacher to do: Suggestions for comprehension strategy instruction

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Can you picture it? This is a popular question often asked in a classroom when a student reads a piece of text. Visualization, the ability to create mental images and associations using background knowledge (Zwiers, 2004), is a tool used to make sense of events shared orally and with texts. Wilhelm (1997) describes readers as entering a “secondary world” when they begin to visualize a text. Proficient readers enter this world and gather textual evidence to comprehend what they are reading.

One of us recently attended a social gathering and during the course of the afternoon was introduced to a woman named Alice (pseudonym). Alice was an experienced teacher and naturally the conversation turned toward education and eventually to the research we are conducting on reading comprehension. When she discovered our interest in this field she commented that even after several years in the classroom, she wasn't sure that she knew how to teach comprehension. Alice's comments reinforced what we were coming to understand, that even some experienced classroom teachers were unsure how to approach comprehension instruction.

As teacher educators, each semester our preservice teachers present us with comparable comments and questions regarding comprehension instruction. When asked about their own recollections of comprehension instruction many preservice teachers say they were instructed to read a text and answer the questions provided at the end of the selection. As expected, they are unsure how to approach specific comprehension strategy instruction.

Durkin (1978) first documented that numerous assessments of comprehension skills existed in elementary classrooms but very little explicit comprehension instruction was evident. Sadly, almost 30 years later the trend does not appear to have been reversed (Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Hampson, &

Echevarria, 1998). As former classroom teachers and now as teacher educators we question why teachers are not incorporating more direct instruction of comprehension strategies into their classroom teaching. Could it be that teachers find comprehension strategy instruction mysterious?

As college professors we mulled over various ideas we have used in our classes, reviewed what we have used as consultants with schools, and reflected on what worked best for us when we had our own elementary and middle school classrooms. What follows are two of our favorite comprehension instructional strategies that we selected based on authenticity, capacity for use with a broad age span, and ability to use repeatedly throughout a school year allowing students the opportunity to transfer and apply the concepts independently.

Visualized creations

In preparation for teaching visualized creations, we suggest teachers choose a small portion of a text that has strong visual images such as a picture book, short story, or a piece of poetry. Once the text has been chosen the next step is to copy it on an overhead transparency leaving space between the lines to record mental images. This whole-class activity begins by explaining that proficient readers mentally visualize what they are reading. As we slowly reveal the sentences one at a time we talk aloud about the mental images we are creating as we read the text recording our mental images on the overhead using either word or picture format. This type of modeling practice has been very helpful for elementary and middle school students. As we share our mental images we also elicit from students the mental images they are creating. On

the transparency, we record both our responses and those of the students.

When the whole-class activity has been completed, we provide students with copies of a two- to three-paragraph text and instruct them to read and then record their visual images and finally share those images with a partner. At the conclusion of the literacy engagement the class reconvenes as a whole to reflect on the practice.

Proficient readers visualize what they read as they construct meaning from a text. Block and Pressley (2003) contended, "Many students require repeated instruction, using a wide variety of genres and hands-on manipulative exercises, before they can visualize concrete and, later, abstract concepts as they read" (p. 116). Visualized creations should take on different forms depending on the age group. Being able to visualize helps "readers connect with text as they consider the sensory images evoked by the characters, settings, and events" (Owocki, 2003, p. 147). For instance, we encourage emergent readers to use crayons or markers to help them make sense of a piece of text. Older children may choose to use pencils, giving their sketches a more professional appearance.

Visualization need not be limited to just a two-dimensional activity. The use of other mediums for visualized creations, such as clay, is a great alternative. It has been our experience that clay offers students a tactile modality that is often more focused and reflective because, for many students, it takes longer to create a response from clay versus paper and crayons. Inexpensive homemade versions of clay work well (for model clay recipes see <http://babyparenting.about.com/cs/activities/a/playdough.htm>) and have been known to last for months, inviting reuse.

Although we are not suggesting these types of responses will work with all texts or all students, we have witnessed repeatedly the engagement students feel and the connections they can make with characters, settings, or events when they have the opportunity to spend more time with one particular portion of the text.

"In the moment" read-aloud journal partners

"In the moment" read-aloud journal partners has been a favorite of ours for many years. This in-

structional strategy encompasses many different metacognitive processes effective readers use, including interpreting text, pausing to reflect, and engaging in retrospection (Block & Pressley, 2002). Vygotsky (1934/1978) helped us to understand that effective learning takes place in social exchanges. Moreover, written exchanges, as opposed to oral exchanges, are more closely related to one's internal discourse (Vygotsky, 1934/1986). "In the moment" embraces both of these ideas.

Part of the charm of this activity is the limited amount of time it takes to prepare once students have received explicit instruction about the mental processes necessary to craft a response, the qualities of a thoughtful response, and how to build on the response of a peer. We are firm believers that if we want to be effective teachers, then we cannot spend inordinate amounts of time preparing, but need to seek out authentic classroom learning experiences that require less time so we can spend more time teaching and reflecting on best practices. This instructional strategy works best when used with an entire book as opposed to a portion of text as demonstrated with the visualized creations.

We begin by choosing a book that is thought-provoking, and have found choosing books that contain mature themes and social issues to be especially effective. For example, *A Day's Work* (Bunting, 1994), *Pink and Say* (Polacco, 1994) and *The Three Questions* (Muth, 2002) have all proved effective with various ages. While we read aloud to our students, we stop at predetermined times to let the students reflect on what is being read to them. We choose our predetermined stopping points based on the impact of the plot line, characterization, or other key story elements. Prior to the reading we indicate stopping points using sticky notes. We explain to our students that they will be paired with another student who is seated near them. They will be responding on paper to the text during the reading and will be passing their papers back and forth during the reading.

As a class, we begin by brainstorming a list of topics that students might choose when responding to the text. It is important that students not be limited to a list but, rather, use the list as a launching point. In the past, students have responded to parallel experiences in their own lives, asked questions about the structure of the text, wondered about the characters who were introduced, made

meaningful intertextual connections, and raised clarifying questions about something that was not clear to them. The scope of response is often varied given the range of proficiency of the readers in any given class.

Next, we provide students with explicit instruction about how to craft a response. We tell our students if they are having a difficult time responding to the reading to refer back to the brainstormed list of topics. We conclude by teaching our students how to respond to their peers' written thoughts. We instruct our students to begin by reading their partners' written texts and then taking a moment to think about how they might reply before they actually begin writing. We have found this quiet thinking time to be an important part of the response process. We remind our students they may answer a posed question, support their peer's ideas and predictions, or raise a thought that has not yet been explored.

Depending on the text, the ages of the students, and their instructional needs, we may stop many times in the text if we think our students require time to work through questions or process information. In other cases, we may only stop a few times. Younger students may write just a phrase or one sentence, and older students may construct a paragraph. After providing the students with a few minutes to respond, we tell the students that we will soon begin reading again. This verbal cue gives the students enough time to conclude their written thoughts. Because we choose books that are very thought-provoking, often the room is virtually silent as students respond. We have found the strategy most effective when students have this quiet time to work through their feelings about the books. Although talk plays an important role in our classrooms, we believe that this silent thinking time is equally important.

As promised, we begin reading again, stopping at an opportune moment and telling the students to now trade their written response with their partner. We first provide the students with an opportunity to read their partner's response and then invite the students to write a response back to their peer. It is important for students to keep their written responses until the teacher stops reading. This invites the students to actively listen to the story and not be distracted by their peer's response. After the students respond to their peers, we signal the students that the

reading aloud will resume. At this point, even though the students have responded to a peer in their class, we ask them not to exchange papers so that they can concentrate on the read-aloud rather than on what their partner has written. The next time we stop reading, the students pass the papers back to the original author and the written dialogue continues.

In essence, the students are maintaining two conversations about the book simultaneously. The benefit is that students receive immediate feedback on their ideas about a text and are able to address questions "in the moment." Students are invited to share their responses, further demonstrating the range of possibilities. We often conclude with a class discussion centered on the written discussions that happened "in the moment." We use the discussion to instruct, clarify ideas, and in general introduce our students to the effective comprehension strategies proficient readers use.

Closing thoughts

Reading comprehension instruction is clearly so much more than answering the questions at the end of the chapter. If students are going to become proficient in comprehension, we, as teachers, need to equip them with skills and strategies that are independently transferable. It is our hope that these activities will help students become actively engaged during reading and help Alice and the many teachers who share her concern to become comfortable with comprehension instruction, knowing that it doesn't have to be the mystery they may have thought it was.

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